GLOBAL SOUTH STUDIES

Introduction: When the Impossible Knocks

By Abolfazl Ahangari | May 19, 2023

In his introduction to *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth* (2020), J. Daniel Elam remarks that the epilogue to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961)"is *a call to abandon Europe*, its mad rush toward total slaughter" (3). *The Wretched of the Earth* obviously has played a key role in the formation of the central idea of this book — it appears in full in Elam's title. But we might look back and re-think this description after reading Elam's own epilogue. There, he reminds us that "Fanon died before Algerian independence," and then draws our attention to the harsh reality that "the colonial world will outlive us, too" (114).[1] Elam's book, along with Fanon's, is a call for abandoning Europe, for ending the mad rush toward total slaughter, for thinking and acting otherwise, while knowing that it will be most likely impossible and Europe "will outlive us too" (114).

But methodologically speaking, this project is quite different from Fanon's book. Although you may sense that Elam and Fanon share the same rage, unlike Fanon, Elam has no intention of providing an answer to the question of colonialism in any clear sense.[2] To me, *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth* fully belongs to the present, or more specifically, the globalization of the Global North. The book's significance lies in its relevance to the current intellectual climate of the twenty-first century. Its subject matter, anticolonialism, once a vital political discourse of the Global South aimed at securing national liberation, has become increasingly obsolete in the postmodern era. Nonetheless, the book's scholarly analysis of this discourse reminds us that academia continues to preserve the rich historical legacy of this discourse. By returning to the anticolonial discourses of the early and mid-twentieth century, Elam starts *an intellectual journey* toward rethinking academic humanities, for relocating the self as a scholar in the humanities by delinking from its colonial and authoritarian structure of power and offering an alternative, while knowing that it is impossible.[3]

This journey is made possible through the work of Erich Auerbach. In *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946), as Elam points out, Auerbach takes a journey "through 'Western Literature,' offering plenty of asides and personal commentary along the way" (126). This journey has gradually given him the will to "survive fascism [and subsequently any other form of authoritarianism or mastery]," if not to resist it (4). Similarly, Elam also takes a journey to colonial India. Along with Auerbach, akin to Beatrice's role in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, he begins an odyssey for self-recognition as a literary scholar and cultural historian: in each of the four chapters, he meets an Indian anticolonialist — Lala Har Dayal, B.R Ambedkar, M.K Gandhi, and Bhagat Singh — and provides a space for each of them to articulate themselves in and for the present as the theorist of anticolonial reading. This intellectual journey has led him to paradoxically resign from his authorial role and find himself as an "inexpert" and "immature" reader. This quest for "self-erasure" may seem

factually impossible for him as the author of *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth*, but not impossible at the level of imagination — since anticolonialism "relies on imagination … to imagine radical, pessimistic but utopian" (10).

Being a reader, for Elam, is a decolonial option. To him, if "British authorship was the mechanism of British colonial authority" (ix), anticolonial reading, as it is elaborately discussed through four Indian anticolonialists, was about envisioning "the possibility of egalitarian emancipation" (ix). Being a reader, one among millions of other readers, was offering them a chance to coexist with others (5). To be or to become a reader was to imagine alternative endings that left mastery undone and structures of power unravelled, rather than simply replaced. By training as a comparative philologist, Elam knows that in *Mimesis*, Auerbach is consciously not taking the position of an author but a reader. While reading Western literary texts, he brilliantly notes that Auerbach is finding himself, "[p]erhaps Auerbach finds himself in Woolf's Mrs. Ramsay, overwhelmed with books neither she nor he had read" (129). Auerbach repeatedly rediscovers himself in the process of reading Western literary texts and *coexisting* with the literary personages; and it represents a possible way for him to survive fascism — more precisely, to stand against European post-enlightenment *individualism* which had gradually led to the formation of Fascism and Nazism in Europe.

This radical egalitarian and communal view, Elam notes, "emerged not from within Europe," and accordingly, remains "largely unintelligible" to Europeans as colonizers (3).[4] In his "master class" introduction, to employ Ramsey McGlazer's phrase, he beautifully demonstrates how Fanon remains unintelligible to Sartre. If Fanon wrote *The Wretched of the Earth* by having in mind "the wretched" or "the colonized" as the interlocutor, Sartre sought to make it intelligible for Europeans, to change the interlocutor and to warn the colonizers. According to Elam, Sartre unintentionally misinterprets Fanon's egalitarian violence aimed at standing against the colonial legal violence and putting an end to "the horrors of its [i.e., European colonial] oppressive rule around the world" as "masochistically bloodthirsty," and as "actual crime and murder" (3, 2). As a response to Sartre, by looking back to the Ranganathan's second law, Elam remarks "Every Reader His Book" (vii). That is, it was Sartre's great mistake to translate/interpret Fanon's words for European audiences, to impose his interpretation on readers, and to not let the book be read by European readers free from Sartre's authority as an expert. While Sartre assumed the *authority* to write a preface and summarize the book, Elam quests for returning to philology as "the art of reading slowly" (4).[5] More precisely, by emphasizing reading as the moment of experiencing "immersion of the self in the ephemeral" (to put it in Bargi's words), and refusing "the expertise, and therefore sovereignty," Elam undermines the authorial role of Sartre as a post-enlightenment total subject (x). In this respect, I believe, *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth* is warning Europeans to "disavow mastery" and to "remain a reader" of world literature (ix): Elam's disavowal of European individualism for the sake of non-European egalitarianism is aimed at making possible "the transition from despotic rule to democracy and freedom" (x).

The Essays

In the first review essay of this forum, the author emphasizes the question of World Literature. Omid Azadibougar in "Comrades in Discontinuity: The Makers of the Other World

Literature" considers Elam's *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth* as a possible option for decolonizing the institution of World Literature and its formation as a global category in Western academia. He wisely notes that this book "shifts the focus of World Literature from the moment of translation and transfer to the moment of defiance and refusal to be coopted into the system."

In the second and third essays, Dilip M. Menon and Drishadwati Bargi examine Elam's anticolonial theory of reading in two different ways. Menon in "Reading for the Future," by emphasizing the concept of future, strongly pushes back against the idea of inconsequentialist reading. To him, an inconsequential act of reading primarily eschews an idea of the future. On the other side, in her "Readers of the Impossible Present," Bargi focuses on reading as "fundamentally a de-idealizing experience" through which the subject encounters "immersion of the self in the ephemeral" and "the contingent and the uncertainties of the present." This self-effacement (putting aside the subject's self-mastery), Bergi notes, is necessary for the appearance of "revolutionary virtue, a practice that is not different from sacrificial love."

In the fourth essay, "The Politics of the Impossible," Ajay Skaria focuses on the question of impossibility, as one of the central themes of Elam's book, and rereads it along with the notion of "the minor [as an equivalent for 'the wretched of the earth']." The minor, as Skaria points out, is "not a majority in waiting" but "the sense of embodying practices, beliefs, or even a way of being that is at odds with the norms dominant in society;" and Elam's monograph is "a very subtle and nuanced exploration of the politics of the minor as practiced by four figures who were quite prominent in Indian politics." In other words, each of these four Indian anticolonialists, by recognizing the self as the minor, has made it possible for acting the impossible.

In his "Impossible Professions," the last review essay of this collection, Ramsey McGlazer considers Elam's book as an anticolonial response to the question of academic humanities in the "neoliberal universities in the Global North." He beautifully reads this book as an author's quest for decolonizing Western academia and notes:

> If the neoliberal university remains, with exceptions, 'a society of individuals … whose only wealth is individual thought,' Elam calls for the decolonization of this society, and he does so by studying those who spoke the 'words outlawed' under colonial rule: 'Brother, sister, friend.' This is not often what's meant by decolonizing the university or the curriculum, but Elam's book shows compellingly that any decolonization worthy of the name would need to include, or perhaps begin with, a transformation of subjectivity, an alteration of the 'imperious' habits that we have learned, the hierarchizing styles of thought that we have internalized and reproduced.

This, I believe, is an ideal end to a beginning.

References

Auerbach, Erich. 2003. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Translated by Willard R. Trask. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Elam, Daniel. 2020. *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth: Anticolonial Aesthetics, Postcolonial Politics*. New York: Fordham Press.

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[1] Similarly, Har Dayal and Bhagat Singh also have never found a chance to see Indian independence, and Gandhi "lived to see Indian independence, but it was not the swaraj he had imagined" (115).

[2] The Fanonian rage or anger here has nothing to do with colonial violence. It has to be perceived, along with the Weberian conception of the state as legitimate violence, as an act of resisting the imposed law which legitimizes the injustice and inhumanity — or more specifically, for putting an end to violence, for the mad rush toward total slaughter.

[3] Ramsey McGlazer thoroughly develops this aspect in his review essay "Impossible Professions."

[4] 'The colonizer' is not the one who colonizes, but part of the greater history in which the colonizing mentality is formed.

[5] Following Isabel Hofmeyr, Elam notes that "reading slow" is also a Gandhian practice, but it has to be reminded that "Gandhi's "slow reading" is not pitted against "fast reading," but rather "reading towards mastery." See p. 161.

About the Authors

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